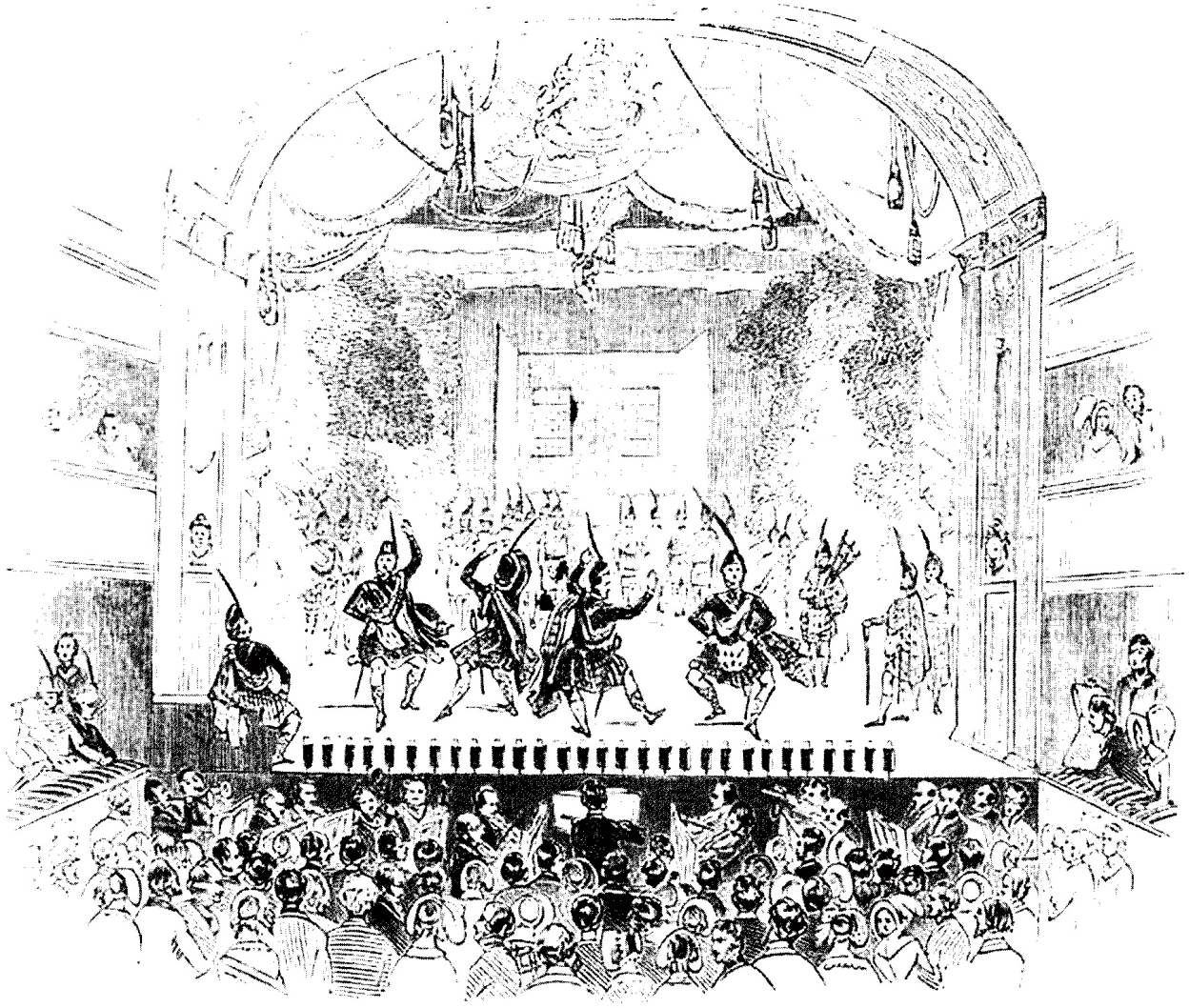
The strathspey in Scottish music



THE GREAT HIGHLAND BAGPIPE COMPETITION, AT THE THEATRE ROYAL, EDINBURGH.

The strathspey in Scottish music

WILLIAM LAMB discusses the origins of the genre and what he says is its uneasy relationship with the great highland bagpipe

The strathspey is undoubtedly the most iconic variety of Scottish traditional music. Collinson describes its characteristic dots and snaps as the, "life blood of Scots musical rhythm".[1] Yet, recent comments on a popular piping forum[2] indicate some hesitancy about how to play strathspeys and even their place in the piping repertoire. That there could be an uneasy relationship between the strathspey and the bagpipes seems paradoxical. How could Scotland's national music and instrument fail to get on like a bothy on fire? In 2013, musicologist Keith Sanger sent me an e-mail me that provides some explanation:

> Pipers seem uncomfortable with strathspeys. Back in the late 1970's [...] there were a number of analyses published in the *Piping Times* of the breakdown of the tunes played by the top competing

[1] Collinson 1966: 29

[2] 28 June 2015: http://forums.bobdunsire.com/forums/showthread.php?t=159550

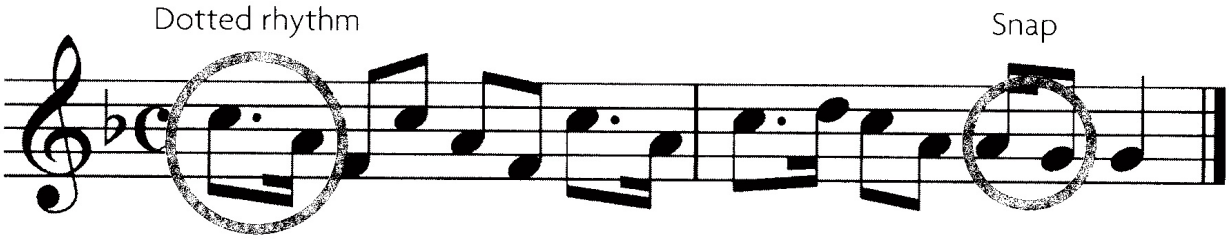
pipers for the March, Strathspey and Reel competitions.[3] What was interesting was that for the marches and reels there were almost as many different tunes as there were competitors. But when it came to the strathspeys, it was a very small pool of tunes with many common to several pipers.

I've been reflecting on Keith's e-mail for some time, and was delighted when asked by the *Piping Times* to present some recent work I have done on the origins of the strathspey.

In what follows, I have condensed my first publication[4] on the origins of the strathspey and made reference to another three.[5] What I hope to demonstrate is that the tune type we know as the strathspey was not the spontaneous invention of 18th century Speyside fiddlers, but rather is a hybrid musical form with rhythmic roots in the Gaelic movement song tradition (i.e. dance and work song). After covering the relevant background and evidence, I will return to briefly discuss the strathspey in a piping context, and speculate on the 'uneasy relationship'. Along the way, I will offer some previously unpublished details that should interest readers already familiar with this subject.

First glimpses in print and manuscript

The strathspey[6] (or 'strathspey reel') is generally taken to be a moderately slow reel in 4/4 which is played with a combination of dotted rhythms and their inversion, known as the 'Scots snap'[7] (see Example 1). As pipers well know, music that exhibits these features is usually referred to as 'pointed', contrasting to the rhythmic consistency of a 'round' style. It is the 'snap' that most typifies the strathspey, as opposed to other dance tune varieties in common time (e.g. reels and hornpipes).



Example 1: The beginning of 'Let's to the Ard' (Bremner 1757: 62)

Purser[8] locates the first instance of the 'snap' in a mid-17th century

[3] See, for example, 'Pipers' Choice' (1975), vol 28, numbers 1 & 3. The top three strathspey submissions ('Maggie Cameron', The Shepherd's Crook' and 'Arniston Castle') account for more than 50% of the total; much less variation than submitted marches and reels. My gratitude to Keith Sanger for these references.

[4] Lamb 2013

[5] Lamb 2012; 2014a; 2014b

[6] Following the Fletts' convention, lowercase forms indicate tune types ('reel') while uppercase forms indicate dance types ('Reel')

[7] Collinson 2012b

[8] Purser 2007: 17

a strathspey. According to David Johnson[9] the earliest written tune in strathspey rhythm is 'Macpherson's Testament', in the Sinkler manuscript.[10] Although there are no snaps, and bars of straight quavers predominate, the tune exhibits dotted notes and the wide intervals characteristic of fiddle strathspeys. Johnson suggests that it would have been played with snaps in performance. The fact that 'Macpherson's Testament' reappears as a fully-fledged strathspey in later publications gives credence to this notion. However, we can locate a potentially earlier example in Playford's *Collection of Original Scotch-Tunes*[11] entitled 'Cronstoune' (Example 2), which later appears in Cumming's collection as 'Maclachlan's Reell' (Example 3).[12] Cumming was a native of Strathspey and, as his is the first collection of fiddle music from the area, it is of special interest.

Keith Sanger[13] has proposed that 'Cronstoune' ['Cranston'] could have been communicated to the Grants of Strathspey via a music master named James McLauchlan (d. 1710). The tune name is certainly lowland. Additionally, a receipt from 1704 indicates McLauchlan taught music for a year to one of Grant's servitors, Charles Calder.[14] His connection to Playford is suggested by the title of the second tune in the collection, *'Mr. Mc. Clauklaines* Scotch-measure'.

Keith's hypothesis makes sense. However, the form of the tune (a transparent reel) is different from others in Playford's book, which is dominated by Scotch measures and song airs.[15] This suggests a different provenance. Could McLauchlan's Strathspey connections have predated 1700? Could the transmission have gone in the opposite direction, from the Highlands to the Lowlands? The tune's context in the book lends some support to this idea. It is followed by an air with a corrupt Gaelic title, 'Keele Cranke' [aka 'Killiecrankie' < *Cille Chnagaidh*], and 'The Berkes of Plunketty', which Glen thought was a strathspey notated incorrectly in 3/4.[16] (It is most certainly plunketty in any case.) Without better evidence of the routes of communication, we are in the realm of conjecture, but this is a common experience when researching Scottish music history. I should note that 'The Berkes of Plunketty' (Example 4) itself is a candidate for the earliest notated strathspey, but only if we accept that it was miscommunicated or mistranscribed.

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[9] Johnson 1984: 32; cf Lamb 2013: 68

[10] Sinkler 1710: 5

[11] Playford 1700: 3;

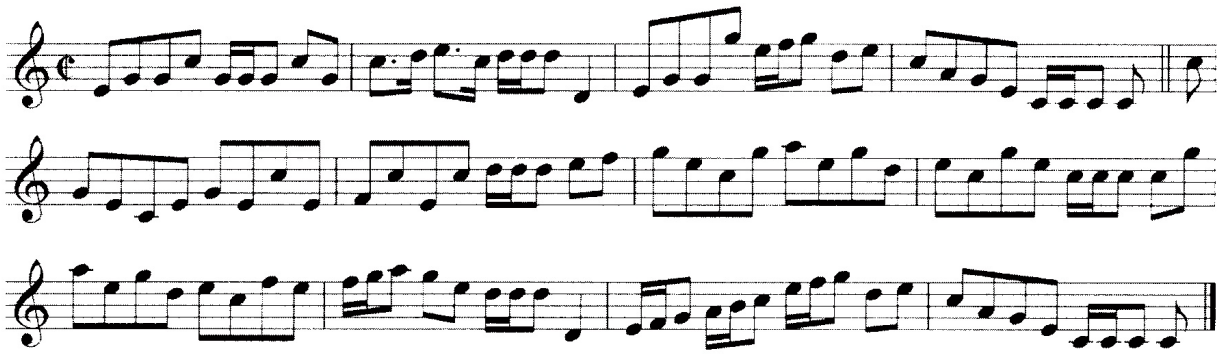
[12] Cumming 1780: 16; see Gore Highland Collections 2005: 81

[13] Personal communication: 14 July, 15

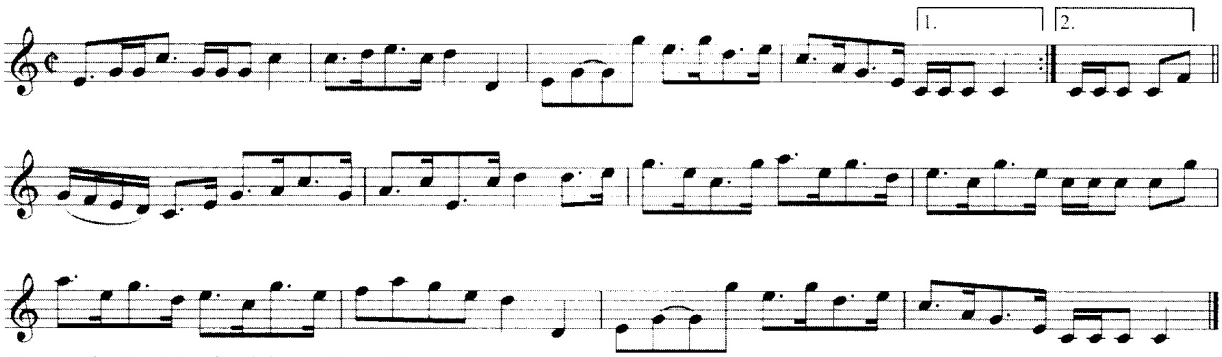
[14] Sanger 2013: 33-34

[15] See Collinson 1966: 124-125

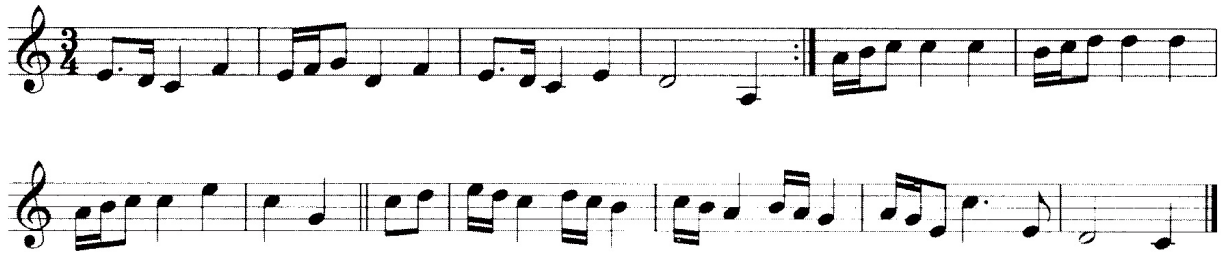
[16] Glen's comment is written in pencil in his copy of the book. He says 'a strathspey – in wrong time'.



Example 2: 'Cronstoune' ('Cranston').



Example 3: 'Maclachlan's Reell'.



Example 4: 'The Berkes of Plunketty'.

The earliest instance known to me of a pipe tune with strathspey features is 'Cow ye Lasses bare', from 1724 (see Example 5). This appears in the Neals' *A Collection of the most Celebrated Scotch Tunes.*[17] Its compass, key and melodic contours strongly suggest that it was taken down from a piper – at least the first few sections – although it is set for the violin.[18] Many will recognise it by the name 'Bob of Fettercairn' and, like many early strathspeys, the melody is associated with a Gaelic dance song ('Mo gheal-chasach').[19] Although, again, no snaps are in evidence in the Neals' version, early arrangers were flexible when it came to dots and snaps. Even in 1840, Mackay tended to use only straight quavers for his strathspey settings. Forrest says that this gave musicians latitude to decide whether to play something as a strathspey or a reel.[20]

The anonymous Menzies manuscript of dance figures (1749), gives us

[17] Neal & Neal 1724: 14

[18] Most likely by Lorenzo Bocchi. See Holman 2007: 61-86

[19] See Lamb 2012: 99, 168

[20] Forrest 2009: 239-40

the first mention of the word 'strathspey' in connection with a specific type of music or dance: two selections are described as 'strathspey reels'. The first compositions clearly exhibiting both snaps and dots, and called 'strathspeys', are two items in *The Caledonian Pocket Companion*[21] named 'A New Strathspey Reel'. Finally, Bremner's 1757 collection gives us the first anonymous tunes described as strathspeys, such as 'Let's to the Ard' (see Example 1).

In order to contextualise these early examples, one must understand that until the late 18th century, musical distinctions were lexicalised differently than they are now. Most musicians today would regard a pointed, moderate tune in 4/4 with triplets and the occasional quadruplet as being a strathspey. A faster tune with no dots or snaps (or quadruplets) would be regarded as a reel. Of course, structurally, strathspeys and reels are identical: the fact that so many tunes can be played in either dress is a testament to this (e.g. 'Back of the Change House').[22]

In earlier times, terms such as jig, reel, strathspey and hornpipe were ambiguous regarding musical form, and more or less interchangeable.[23] Even our first *bona fide* collection of strathspeys is nebulous. Cumming's first edition (1780) is entitled *A Collection of Strathspey, or Old Highland Reels* but the second, posthumous edition (1782) is called, *A Collection of Strathspeys or Old Highland Reels.* In two years, old highland reels from Strathspey had become 'strathspeys'. Although all of the tunes are in duple time, they run the whole gamut of pointedness: some resemble reels, some resemble strathspeys and others are mixed. The evidence indicates that the strathspey as a 'tune type' did not exist until it was standardised by 18th century arrangers. I maintain that the 'strathspey reel' or 'strathspey' was, originally, simply the dotted and snapped style in which highlanders played and sung common time dance melodies. The point at which 'moderate, pointed reels' entered the awareness of lowland Scots – the mid 18th century – coincides with the opening up of the highlands post-Culloden; this represented the greatest historical contact between the *Gaidheil* (Gaels) and *Goill* (Lowlanders).[24]

From a modern perspective, the pre-19th century picture is confusing, but it can be cleared up by inverting our emphasis. We are accustomed to thinking of tune types (e.g. reel) as being primary, and their homophonous dances (the reel) as being secondary. However, in earlier times, a 'reel' was any tune that could be used to accompany a reel; dancing was the definitive activity, not the music. It was inconsequential if a 'reel' was in 4/4, 6/8 or even 9/8.

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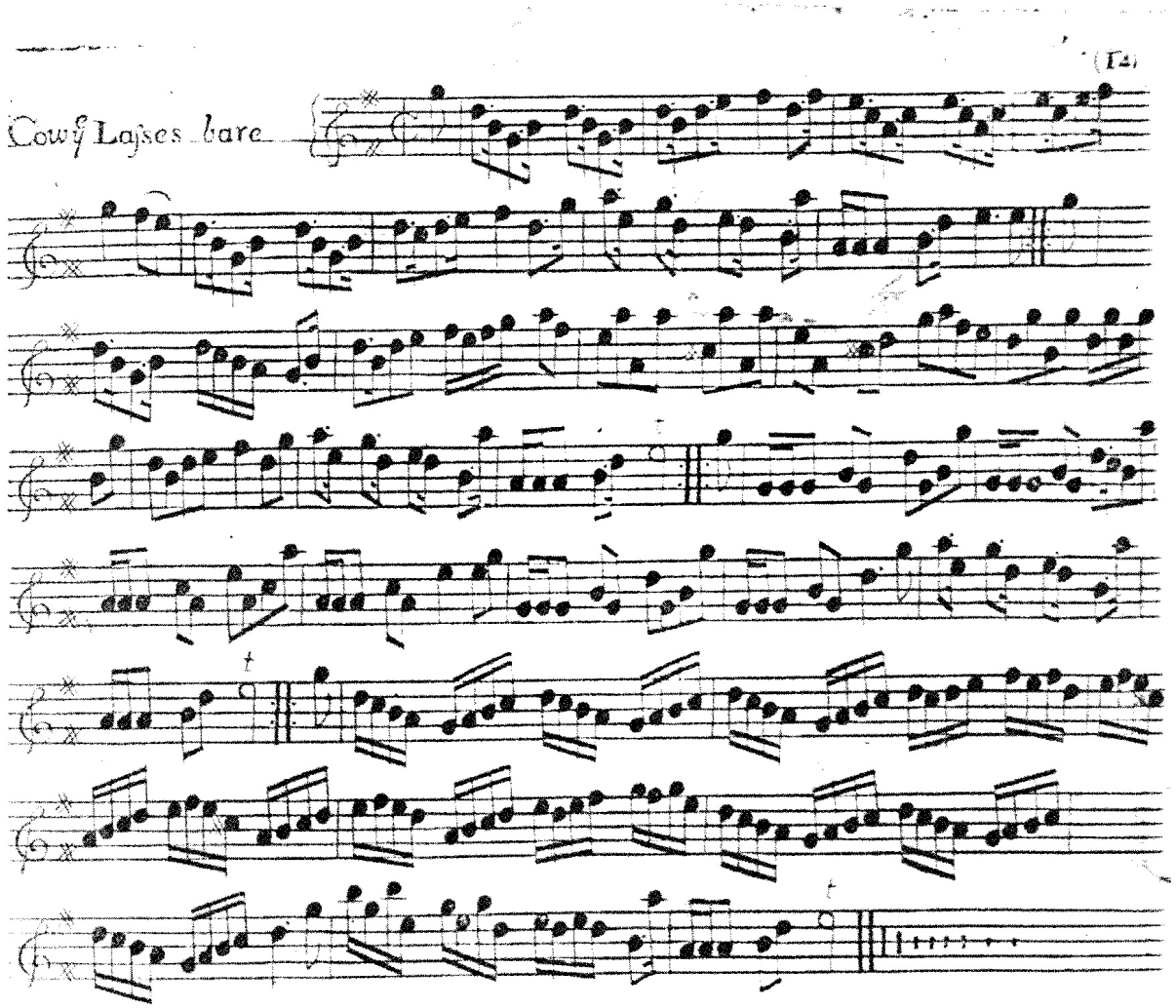
[21] Oswald: Vol 3

[22] Additional examples in Lamb 2013: 93n

[23] Brennan 2001: 90

[24] Lamb 2014b: 97-101; cf Flett & Flett 1972: 97



Example 5: 'Cow ye Lasses bare'. [25]

To summarise, although strathspey prototypes can be detected in print more or less from 1700, firm connections between labels and musical forms only began to settle down late in the 18th century, due to the emphasis placed on dance at the time. With this in mind, let us now approach what has become the standard account of the origin of the strathspey and suggest some revisions.

The origins of the strathspey: a revised account

The strathspey is generally understood to be an 18th-century variety of fiddle music developed by the Browns and Cummings, musical families native to the Spey valley region.[26] Although not well-known, this narrative seems to originate with Newte's *Prospects and Observations; On a Tour in England and Scotland.*[27] 'Newte' was Rev Dr William

[25] Neal and Neal 1724: 14. Reproduced with the kind permission of Special Collections, Queens University Belfast (from Bunting Collection no 31, ms 4).
[26] Campbell 1798: 20; Collinson 1966: 206; Bruford 1994: 74; Doherty 1999; Newton 2009: 253
[27] Newte 1791: 163-165

Thomson (1746-1817), a Scottish-born, fiddle-playing minister. (At the time he wrote the book, he had been living in London. He took up a career in professional writing after being disgraced in the ministry). The key section reads:

> With regard to the first composers, or even performers of strathspey reels, there are not any certain accounts. According to the tradition of the country, the first who played them were the Browns of Kincardin: to whom are ascribed a few of the most ancient tunes. After these men, the Cummings of Freuchie, now Castle-Grant [Grantown-on-Spey], were in the highest estimation for their knowledge and execution in strathspey music; and most of the tunes handed down to us are certainly of their composing.

This is patent hearsay: Thomson never actually visited Strathspey on his tour of the highlands.[28] Regardless, the evidence suggests that the strathspey was more widely distributed than its supposed home region.[29]

Dance master Francis Peacock (1727-1807) wrote that the strathspey, "is, in many parts of the Highlands preferred to the common Reel".[30] Peacock was in the position to know this; he taught students from across the *Gàidhealtachd* in the mid-18th century. More telling is the fact that Patrick McDonald's 1784 *Collection of Highland Gaelic Airs* contains traditional melodies described as strathspeys from the northern Highlands (e.g. Sutherland), Perthshire and the Western Isles. Of course, this will be of no surprise to those familiar with Gaelic song; the strathspey rhythm is ubiquitous in labour and dance song. As Emmerson says, "[I]t is not possible to claim that the rhythm is peculiar to the district of Strathspey, for it has an obviously ancient hold on the vocal dance music of the Gael".[31] Cumming's preface is also suggestive in this regard when it says: "that species of musical composition called a reel, and particularly the strathspey reel, is the catch, the brisk and lively song, of the natives of Caledonia" [capital letters removed]. Although we have yet to reach a consensus on the age of Gaelic dance-song, labour song can be traced back to the 16th century at least. Yet, it is clearly infelicitous to call a waulking song a strathspey. Some clarifications are needed before we can move forward.

Many have conflated the strathspey rhythm with the tune type and this engenders confusion; 'strathspey' means too many things. It is useful to distinguish between four types of strathspeys:

- a rhythmic matrix closely associated with Scottish Gaelic movement song;
- a conventionalised form of instrumental dance music, in two or more parts of four or eight bars;

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[28] See a map of his travels in Rackwitz 2007: CD-ROM.

[29] Gibson (2000: 110–115) bolsters this from the perspective of the bagpipes.

[30] Peacock 1805: 89–90

[31] Emmerson 1972: 173

- a later, more refined version for listening (i.e. the 'slow strathspey');
- a type of dance, the steps of which were formerly indistinguishable from the reel.

Here, we are considering the first two types only. By making these distinctions, we avoid circular thinking and introduce an important historical dimension. Given the highly developed and archaic Gaelic song tradition – and that instrumental dance music tends to evolve from earlier song traditions[32] – we can be certain that Gaelic song imbued a rhythmic substrate (i.e. the matrix) upon a later instrumental tradition rather than the converse. Bücher[33] made the observation long ago that dance music and song tend to mirror work song rhythms. What is significant is: 1) both work and dance song in Gaelic culture involve rhythmically joined-up, synchronised human movement; and 2) the strathspey rhythm is ubiquitous in these contexts. Notably, neither the strathspey nor rhythmically synchronised work song seem to be native to the Irish Gaels, who so resemble their Scottish cousins in other aspects of traditional culture. Unless we are prepared to believe that Gaelic work song is a relatively modern development, and that it was conditioned by fiddle music, we must accept that the rhythmic matrix existed in Gaelic culture long before it was recognised in Strathspey. In other words, the strathspey rhythm must have come from Gaelic song.

I have compiled a number of musical examples showing the relationship between the strathspey and Gaelic song. Transcriptions are available in my 2013 paper, *Reeling in the Strathspey*, and related audio – from the from the School of Scottish Studies Archives can be heard at http://youtu.be/LP188D6Phlo. Not only do these examples provide evidence of the ubiquity of the rhythmic matrix in Gaelic work song, they also show that Gaelic speakers playing or singing reels – after a strathspey or in isolation – tend to exhibit pointed rhythm. This is obscured by tempo: it becomes obvious when the reels are slowed down to the same speed as strathspeys using audio software. In other words, the 'reels'

[32] Sachs 1937: 181; Ling 1997: 180

[33] Bücher 1899, in Chamberlain 1901: 69

of Gaelic speakers in the early to mid-20th century are almost identical to 'strathspeys'. It is unlikely that this is a recent development, and I would argue that the rhythmic matrix existed in Scottish Gaelic culture for centuries before it was first documented. On this basis, and others that I discuss elsewhere,[34] I believe that the strathspey *qua* tune type had its beginning as an ecotype ('regional variant') of the reel in Gaelic-speaking areas. However, as mentioned, the rhythm that typified it had been long extant in Gaelic culture prior to this, in song.

But what of the reel as a form of music and dance? When and whence did it emerge? This is an involved and somewhat polemic[35] topic: a discussion for another time. For the moment, I would like to return to the 'uncomfortable relationship' between the strathspey and the highland bagpipes.

Strathspeys and bagpipes: an uncomfortable relationship?

Early collections of 'light' music for the pipes show an unmistakable connection to Gaelic dance song. Looking at Donald MacDonald's *Ancient Martial Music of Caledonia Called Pìobaireachd* (c 1822), each of the 12 pieces of 'light music' is associated with a Gaelic title, taken from a song. For example, 'Cripple Malcolm in the Glen' is 'Calum Crùbach anns a' Ghleann' *(recte),* the well-known *port-à-beul.* If we examine Gunn's collection (1848), 87% of the selections have Gaelic titles. Again, most of these appear to be from the lyrics of Gaelic dance-songs. As Gunn states in his preface:

> [The titles are] the original Gaelic designations by which the Airs have been known in the Highlands, with a free translation opposite. These designations consist generally of something peculiar or striking in the verse or verses to which they were composed[.]

The practice of singing for dancing is undoubtedly ancient, regardless of the antiquity – or not – of the Gaelic dance-songs that have come down to us. When the pipes began to be used for dancing in the Highlands is a matter for conjecture. Yet, given that music and dance are universal human impulses[36], we can only assume that dancing and piping went together from the beginning.[37] On the other hand, the highland bagpipes would have been prohibitively expensive for the average person in earlier times and were rare.[38] Keith Sanger[39] estimated the cost of a set of highland pipes in the mid-18th century at £3-4. Consider this against the net worth of most people in the highlands at the time, at £4-5. Sanger once asked

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[34] Lamb 2013; 2014a

[35] Cf Lamb 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Newton 2013; 2014; 2015

[36] Kemp, Christopher. 2015. 'Island of wild children: Would they learn to be human?' Newscientist, 3 June 15, issue 3024

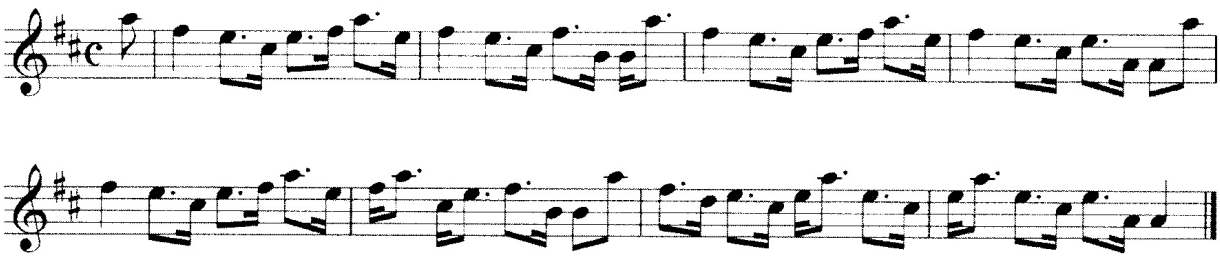
[37] Cannon 2008: 105

[38] Cf Sanger 2012

[39] 6/10/13: personal communication

attendees at a Piobaireachd Society conference, "If [purchasing] a set of pipes would require you to [forfeit] your home and its contents along with a year's income, how many of you would own a set of pipes today?". Not a soul raised a hand.

So, if dancing of some description occurred in the highlands prior to the greater affordability of musical instruments, it is only sensible that it normally occurred to song. Supporting this notion, song continued to be used for dancing in remote Hebridean regions until the 20th century[40] and we have been left with an enormous body of dance songs in Gaelic (and Scots[41] as well). Considering the natural impulse of Gaelic speakers to sing dance tunes in a pointed style, it seems reasonable to assume that the average Gaelic-speaking bagpiper in the 18th or 19th century would have played them in a similar fashion. It would have taken determination to do otherwise.[42] Moving forward through piping history, when reels are still played by many pipers in a pointed fashion, the distinction between them and strathspeys – particularly at a slower tempo – is lost. I suggest that this a key component of the 'uncomfortable relationship'. For example, consider the third part of the reel 'Pretty Marion' played by Rona Lightfoot, the celebrated South Uist piper. It is nearly identical to a strathspey.[43]



Example 6: 'Pretty Marion': 3rd part (Rona Lightfoot)

What *is* a strathspey to a piper who plays reels in a moderate, pointed fashion, particularly when the lion's share of those reels – historically, in any case – correlate with Gaelic dance song? They are one and the same, for all intents and purposes. We can find other points of view, of course, such as from Joseph McDonald. He described piping reels in the 18th century as rounder than their violin equivalents.[44] So, more investigation is clearly required.

Depending on *your* point of view, this piece may or may not ease the relationship between the pipes and the strathspey. In any case, I hope that

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[40] See Lamb 2012: 21-27

[41] Cooke 1986: Appendix 4

[42] In Nova Scotia, fiddlers took rhythmic cues from dance songs and this was even valorised as an indicator of 'Gaelic' style: see Shaw 1992/93: 44-46.

[43] Original audio at http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/53524/1; see also youtu.be/LP188D6Phlo.

[44] See Cannon 1994: 86

it stimulates further discussion about the history of Scotland's national tune type, and its relationship to Gaelic song, dance and early musical culture.

I wish to thank Kath Campbell, Keith Sanger and Gary West, for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

• *William Lamb is a lecturer and senior tutor in Celtic & Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh.*

ECHOES FROM OBAN

The Duke of Argyll with Ian K. MacDonald who proudly displays his Gold Medal.

James MacHattie with daughter, Briar.

A Grade March judges: John Wilson, Bill Livingstone and Bruce Hitchings BEM MBE.

Willie Morrison: colour-coordinated.

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